

# Journal of the Canadian Historical Association Revue de la Société historique du Canada



## Images of Women in the Sermons of Guillaume Pepin (c.1465-1533)

Larissa Taylor

Volume 5, numéro 1, 1994

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/031082ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/031082ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

### ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer cet article

Taylor, L. (1994). Images of Women in the Sermons of Guillaume Pepin (c.1465-1533). *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 5(1), 265–276. <https://doi.org/10.7202/031082ar>

### Résumé de l'article

Presque toutes les histoires des attitudes et des croyances reliées aux rapports sociaux de sexe avant l'ère moderne conservent le stéréotype d'un homme d'Église médiéval misogyne. De telles généralisations n'aident ni à la compréhension des attitudes en des lieux et des temps particuliers, ni encore à l'évaluation des changements à travers le temps. L'étude des croyances des individus permet une explication plus nuancée et plus riche des croyances des hommes à propos des femmes. Les sermons de la fin du Moyen Âge révèlent un large éventail d'attitudes à l'égard des femmes. Dans ceux de Guillaume Pépin (c. 1465-1533), on retrouve la prêcherie d'un homme qui ne classe pas les femmes comme les incarnations du Bien et du Mal, mais qui parle plutôt longuement d'elles, et qui se penche sur leurs problèmes quotidiens avec sympathie et compassion. Les exemples qu'il évoque sont souvent ceux de femmes fortes et indépendantes d'esprit. La comparaison avec des sermons du milieu du seizième siècle montre que maints prédicateurs de l'époque postérieure correspondent davantage au stéréotype, l'attention donnée aux femmes diminuant drastiquement et les descriptions négatives prenant le dessus. Chez eux, un usage différent de la langue réduit les images des femmes à une dimension unique, et le portrait qui en résulte est celui de la subordination, de la faiblesse et de la bêtise. Ces transformations relèvent de plusieurs facteurs, dont la simplification des structures du sermon amenée par la Contre-Réforme, les préjugés au sujet de la prêtrise attisés la Réforme, les efforts d'imposition d'une orthodoxie catholique, de même qu'un accent de plus en plus prononcé sur « l'ordre naturel » des choses.

# Images of Women in the Sermons of Guillaume Pepin (c.1465-1533)

LARISSA TAYLOR

## Résumé

*The stereotype of the misogynistic medieval churchman persists in almost all scholarly assessments of gender attitudes and beliefs in the premodern period. Such sweeping generalizations do little to help us understand attitudes in one particular time and place, or changes over time; studies of individuals allow a more nuanced and richer understanding of male beliefs about women. Sermons in the late Middle Ages exhibit the full range of attitudes about women. In the sermons of Guillaume Pepin (c. 1465-1533), we find the preaching of a man who did not categorize women as the personification of Good or Evil, but talked at length about women and their problems in daily life with sympathy and compassion. The figures he evokes in his sermons are quite often strong, independent-minded women. Comparison with sermons in the mid-sixteenth century shows that many later preachers conform more closely to the stereotype, with the amount of attention given to women in sermons decreasing dramatically and negative descriptions predominating. Language is used much differently, and the resulting images of women are one-dimensional, with the female sex portrayed as subordinate, weak, and silly. These changes can be attributed to a number of factors, including the simplified sermon structure of the post Reformation period, the Reformation and misconceptions about the priesthood of all believers, the attempt to impose Catholic orthodoxy, and an increasing emphasis on the "natural order" of things.*

\* \* \* \*

*Presque toutes les histoires des attitudes et des croyances reliées aux rapports sociaux de sexe avant l'ère moderne conservent le stéréotype d'un homme d'Église médiéval misogyne. De telles généralisations n'aident ni à la compréhension des attitudes en des lieux et des temps particuliers, ni encore à l'évaluation des changements à travers le temps. L'étude des croyances des individus permet une explication plus nuancée et plus riche des croyances des hommes à propos des femmes. Les sermons de la fin du Moyen Age révèlent un large éventail d'attitudes à l'égard des femmes. Dans ceux de Guillaume Pepin (c. 1465-1533), on retrouve la prédication d'un homme qui ne classe pas les femmes comme les incarnations du Bien et du Mal, mais qui parle plutôt longuement d'elles, et qui se penche sur leurs problèmes quotidiens avec sympathie et compassion. Les exemples qu'il évoque sont souvent ceux de femmes fortes et indépendantes d'esprit. La comparaison avec des sermons du milieu du seizième siècle montre que maints*

---

Special thanks go to Mark Konnert for his very useful comments and criticism.

*prédicateurs de l'époque postérieure correspondent davantage au stéréotype, l'attention donnée aux femmes diminuant drastiquement et les descriptions négatives prenant le dessus. Chez eux, un usage différent de la langue réduit les images des femmes à une dimension unique, et le portrait qui en résulte est celui de la subordination, de la faiblesse et de la bêtise. Ces transformations relèvent de plusieurs facteurs, dont la simplification des structures du sermon amenée par la Contre-Réforme, les préjugés au sujet de la prêtrise attisés la Réforme, les efforts d'imposition d'une orthodoxie catholique, de même qu'un accent de plus en plus prononcé sur «l'ordre naturel» des choses.*

Few stereotypes have endured so persistently as that of the misogynistic medieval churchman. Whether portrayed as a preacher railing against women who lead men to perdition, a priest complaining about women's shameful dress and behavior in church, or a Boccaccian friar lusting after every woman in sight, the medieval churchman is depicted as seldom having a good word to say about women — except, of course, that most untypical of women, the Virgin Mary. In his recent work, *Medieval Misogyny*, Howard Bloch states that “. . . the topic of misogyny, like the mace or the chastity belt, participates in a vestigial horror practically synonymous with the Middle Ages . . . one of the assumptions governing our perception of the early Christian and medieval period is the viral presence of anti feminism . . . [I]t dominates ecclesiastical writing, letters, sermons, theological tracts, and discussions and compilations of canon law . . .”<sup>1</sup> Susan Haskins, author of *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor*, argues that “the feminine images which emerge from texts and sermons as they waxed eloquently and vituperatively against the other half of God's creation leave no doubt as to the contempt in which women were held by medieval clerics.”<sup>2</sup> She adds that “. . . the cleric's view of women was all but unanimous: woman was Eve, wanton, lustful, and a temptation from [man's] pursuit of perfection.”<sup>3</sup>

From a historical perspective, such sweeping generalizations are at best unhelpful, and at worst positively misleading. Fifteenth and sixteenth-century sermons reveal, for example, that the attitudes of late medieval preachers to (and their presentations of) women span the full spectrum of views. As a result, not only is misogyny a meaningless term when applied universally to the period, but assuming its universality allows real examples of misogyny to pass unnoticed. Only by looking at individual churchmen and their works — and casting aside useless generalizations — can we arrive at a more realistic assessment of gender ideologies in the medieval period.

Certainly there is no lack of stereotypical formulations of women to be found in late medieval sermons, and these were often taken directly from patristic sources. Antoine Farinier (d. ca. 1480) tells his audience that “it is good never to touch a woman, and

- 
1. Howard Bloch, *Medieval Misogyny and the Invention of Western Romantic Love* (Chicago, 1991), 7.
  2. Susan Haskins, *Mary Magdalen: Myth and Metaphor* (New York, 1993), 148.
  3. *Ibid*, 157

consequently bad to do so."<sup>4</sup> He adds that "the danger is greatest in more beautiful women than in those who are deformed . . . and their beautiful clothing demonstrates the lustfulness of the female soul."<sup>5</sup> Jean Cleree (d. 1507) calls women who adorn themselves with long trains and sleeves "more blind than demons."<sup>6</sup> Thomas Illyricus (d. 1528) simply states that "the beauty of a woman is the occasion of much evil."<sup>7</sup>

Although historians have treated these diatribes on vanity as evidence and proof of misogyny, pure and simple, they do not tell the whole story of late medieval preachers and their perceptions of women. For one thing, there is a question of balance and perspective: other similar themes, like lawyers' greed, merchants' fraud, and men's drunkenness, were also ubiquitous in medieval sermons. For another, not all sermons contained such diatribes. To help correct this one-sided view, this paper will examine the case of a single, but influential, French preacher, Guillaume Pepin — of whom it was said that "if you don't know Pepin, you don't know how to preach,"<sup>8</sup> and whose sermons continued to be reprinted in Venice and Antwerp late into the seventeenth century despite the elaborate (and soon to be outmoded) scholastic style in which they were composed.

Pepin was born of a poor Norman family around 1465. At some time in the late 1470s, he presented himself for admission to the Couvent Royal de Saint-Louis d'Évreux, a Dominican priory. His talents were immediately evident, and he was sent to the famous Convent of Saint Jacques in Paris in order to study for the doctorate in theology, which he received from the University of Paris in 1501.<sup>9</sup> Pepin was active in the church reform movement of the time (often referred to as the *préréforme*) and was instrumental in persuading the convent of Évreux to join the reformed Congregation of Holland. He served as prior of Évreux from 1504-1506<sup>10</sup>, regent doctor at the University of Paris from 1509-1510<sup>11</sup>, and a regular preacher to Francis I.<sup>12</sup> Fifteen of his books, most of them sermons, were printed; but he was also the author of confessional works, Biblical commentaries, and works of Marial piety.<sup>13</sup> He was very active against heresy in the fifteen years after Lutheranism first made its impact on France, and died in Évreux on January 18, 1533.<sup>14</sup>

4. Antoine Farinier, *Sermones viginti et unus de peccatis* (Paris, 1519), fol. 43.

5. Ibid, fol. 47.

6. Jean Cleree, *Sermones quadragesimales* (Paris, n.d.), fol. 65.

7. Thomas Illyricus, *Sermones aurei ac excellentissimi* (Toulouse, 1521), fol. 138.

8. A. Vacant, E. Mangénot and E. Amman (eds.), *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* (Paris, 1899-1950).

9. James Farge, *Biographical Register of Paris Doctors of theology, 1500-1536* (Toronto, 1980), 364.

10. J. Quéatif and J. Échard, *Scriptoris ordinis praedicatorum* (New York, 1959), 2:1, 87.

11. Farge, *Biographical Register*, 364.

12. Quéatif and Échard, *Scriptoris ordinis praedicatorum*, 2:1, 87.

13. P. Féret, *La faculté de théologie et ses docteurs les plus célèbres: Époque moderne* (Paris, 1896), 2, 261.

14. Marie-Dominique Chapotin, "Le couvent royal de Saint-Louis d'Évreux," *Études historiques sur la province dominicaine de France* (Paris, 1890), 43.

In the 611 sermons considered here, women and “women’s issues” occupy a prominent place. They include theoretical views on the nature of women, but most of the material has to do with Biblical women, female saints, and contemporary women. In the latter category, Pepin discusses issues such as virginity, marriage, widowhood, sexuality, contraception, abortion, prostitution, wife beating, victimization and alcoholism, among other subjects. His view of women is surprisingly complex, with many positive and sympathetic formulations. He almost never speaks of woman with a capital W, but considers individuals and their problems.\*

Pepin spends much less time than most preachers on the sociological and gender implications of the Fall. One of the few mentions in his sermons of these events provided a salutary lesson for women and men in his own time. He tells his listeners:

There was extraordinary discord between men and women, who alternately reproached each other for the transgressions of the first parents, with the men saying that the woman had seduced the man. For their part, the women claimed that Adam was a fool to have behaved in such a manner, wanting to please his wife more than God.<sup>15</sup>

The formulation of this argument is intriguing — it is the women who have the superior argument.

On the issue of vanity, Pepin seems on the surface to be no exception to the general rule among late medieval preachers. Yet there are differences. He insists that a woman’s beauty is often the cause of *her* downfall, exposing *her* to many perils and temptations (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> Too often beauty leads to the sin of pride, for he notes that “there are few good-looking girls and women today who do not glory in their beauty.”<sup>17</sup> Not satisfied with the natural coloring God gave them, many women paint their faces, which he sees as a sort of visual blasphemy.<sup>18</sup> He states ironically, “I will be silent about the many vain and pompous women who go to church in order to be seen and admired,”<sup>19</sup> yet castigates other women who spend so much time making themselves up that they miss high mass.<sup>20</sup> “In this,” he says, “they are just like peacocks, glorying in the beauty of their feathers, which they fan out when they find men observing them secretly.”<sup>21</sup>

\*In any study based on sermons, it must of course be remembered that the preacher’s task was

15. Guillaume Pepin, *Conciones quadragesimales ad sacros evangeliorum sensus pro feri quadragesimae mystice et moraliter explicandos* (Antwerp, 1656), 342.

16. Guillaume Pepin, *Rosarium aureum B. Mariae virginis* (Antwerp, 1656), 52.

17. Guillaume Pepin, *Conciones de sanctis sive de imitatione sanctorum, pro illorum diebus, qui toto anno in ecclesia celebrantur* (Antwerp, 1656), 530.

18. Pepin, *CO*, 84.

19. Pepin, *RA*, 334.

20. Guillaume Pepin, *Conciones dominicalium ex epistolas et evangeliiis totius anni, pars aestivalis* (Antwerp, 1656), 46.

21. Pepin, *RA*, 253.

These comments are significant for what they do not say. Pepin speaks primarily of the consequences the woman will suffer *personally* as a result of *her own actions*: pride in her beauty is a deadly sin that will endanger *her* soul; it can lead to temptation and worse sin; and it can make her lose sight of what is really important — including, of course, attendance at sermons. This attitude differs sharply from that of later sixteenth-century preachers who, ignoring the implications for the female soul, concentrate on how such vanity *leads to the ruin of men*.

While most Catholic theologians and churchmen in the late medieval period recognized the necessity of marriage and even emphasized its sacramental character, with Paul they usually considered it as second best, the acceptable option for those who could not remain chaste. More than most of his contemporaries, Pepin positively rejoiced in the idea of marriage. He calls it “the most excellent, worthy and highest state, just like the union of Christ with his Church.”<sup>22</sup> Then he goes further, saying:

It is indeed a special gift of God when a man and woman of diverse parentage, possibly from different regions, often having different customs and appearances, can come together and love one another in the Lord after they have been joined in holy matrimony.<sup>23</sup>

Pepin has harsh words for those who take marriage lightly, or propose matrimony in order to seduce young virgins:

Smooth-talking men try to deceive modest virgins by talking about betrothal. Certainly we find many rich and notable men, as well as those holding church benefices, who promise too much to these poor girls, saying that they will marry highly and have many good things, but who leave them as soon as they have had their will with them.<sup>24</sup>

He also complains about delayed marriage:

There are many nobles today who marry late and give their youth over to all sorts of dissipation. They rape young girls and then hand them over to their lackeys, the more easily to have their way with them. Others get married, but when their wives die, they choose to remain widowed rather than remarrying, saying it would diminish their children's inheritance. But adding that it is impossible for them to live chastely, they lead shameful lives, and sire many bastards.<sup>25</sup>

Many medieval commentators, including Robert de Sorbon, Hugh of St. Victor, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Guibert of Tournai had expounded the so called *rib topoi* in a way that

---

22. Guillaume Pepin, *Sermones quadraginta de destructione Ninive, hoc est omnis generis vitiorum* (Paris, 1527), fol. 142.

23. *Ibid.*, fol. 205.

24. *Ibid.*, fol. 223.

25. Guillaume Pepin, *Conciones in septem psalmos poenitentiales* (Antwerp, 1656), 131.

emphasized equality within the marital relationship and the positive benefits of a companionable relationship.<sup>26</sup> Pepin follows this tradition:

I want to point out that the woman is not subject to her husband as a servant is to her master. God did not make the first woman from the foot of man, although he could have done so, because he did not want it to seem that she was the man's servant. Nor did he make her from his head, because he didn't want it to seem that she should dominate the man. But he made her from the side, to show the equality of them in their marital rights. Even so, in the household, the man is the head.<sup>27</sup>

Pepin emphasizes that male domination within the home should be considered by both partners to be a subjection of love, not of fear.<sup>28</sup> Their "equality" meant that neither husband nor wife had the right to commit adultery.<sup>29</sup> Even if a wife was chronically ill, had leprosy, or was sterile, her husband had no right to engage in extramarital relations.<sup>30</sup> The only adulterous liaison Pepin condoned was one in which a wife assumed her husband to be dead if he had not returned from abroad or the wars after seven years. But even though he viewed her condition as sinless, Pepin tells her that she must return to her first husband.<sup>31</sup>

Although Pepin never denigrates marriage as an institution, he admits that the ideal does not always translate into reality. He sadly relates that some wives "honor their dogs more than their husbands. For when the husband returns from out of doors with the dog, the wife makes much of the dog, and applauds it, but turns her face away from her husband."<sup>32</sup>

In his discussions of reproduction, Pepin does not deviate from the church position, warning women not to practice contraception or procure abortions.<sup>33</sup> He speaks out against abortion, yet adds a mitigating phrase, "I don't want **universally to excuse women from blame**, but along with the holy doctors I want to say that such little ones will not have to undergo all the sadness and perpetual torments reserved for the damned (emphasis added)."<sup>34</sup> But he categorically condemns infanticide. "Such women, when they give birth, strangle their little ones in the middle of the night, or throw them into the river, or flush them down the latrine. This kind of murder exceeds all others."<sup>35</sup>

---

26. Erik Kooper, "Loving the Unequal Equal: Medieval Theologians and Marital Affection," in Robert R. Edwards and Stephen Spector (eds.) *The Old Daunce: Love, Friendship, Sex and Marriage in the Medieval World* (Albany, 1991), 45-53.

27. Pepin, *DN*, fol. 136.

28. Ibid.

29. Pepin, *CQ*, 205.

30. Pepin, *DN*, fol. 143.

31. Ibid, fol. 212.

32. Pepin, *RA*, 127.

33. Pepin, *AD*, 26.

34. Pepin, *SP*, 403.

35. Pepin, *AD*, 67.

When Pepin discusses widowhood, he admits that women often face many adversities in this state and suffer greatly.<sup>36</sup> Yet he argues that by remaining a widow, a woman can preserve her independence and remain her own mistress:

When a woman does not remarry, but remains a widow, she has much greater freedom. She is mistress of herself, her family, and her home. However, if she marries a powerful man, she will not afterwards be able to dispose of herself or her possessions, except perhaps a few small personal belongings.<sup>37</sup>

But it is when Pepin talks about Biblical women, female saints and attitudes among contemporary women regarding religion that his views are the most surprising. All medieval and early modern preachers were preoccupied with the question of why the women at the cross were more faithful than the men, and why Christ chose Mary Magdalene as first witness to the Resurrection. Pepin tells his listeners that while the men around Jesus insulted him, the women bemoaned his misery.<sup>38</sup> In response to the issue of why Christ first chose to appear to Mary Magdalene, Pepin explains:

It is proven that women are more devout than men, and this through the example of those learned women who were so devoted to Christ. Although during his time on earth Christ found certain men agreeable, never did he find such perseverance and constancy among his disciples as he found in these women. These were the women who followed him as he traveled through the countryside preaching, and who ministered to his needs according to their abilities. These were the women who followed him to the cross although his disciples had fled. Similarly, there were women who upon his death prepared the aromatic ointments for his body in the tomb. There were others who were neither terrified of the shadows and darkness of night nor the ferocity of the armed soldiers. And so women announced the triumph of the Resurrection, for Christ knew that above all grace was the grace of a woman.<sup>39</sup>

He further argues that while women's testimony is not generally allowed in civil matters, a woman has the right to testify in spiritual matters, and hence Mary's announcement to the disciples.<sup>40</sup> This leads into a discussion of Biblical cases in which God has empowered women to speak. Pepin warns men not to scorn the gift of prophecy in women, since there are numerous examples of this in scripture.<sup>41</sup> He gives the specific case of Anna, wife of Tobit,<sup>42</sup> and then goes further, suggesting that women can not merely prophesy, but preach as well. It is important to note that he uses the Latin *predicare* (to preach) in all of these statements:

---

36. Pepin, *CS*, 322.

37. Pepin, *CQ*, 200.

38. *Ibid*, 296; cf. *Ibid*, 434.

39. *Ibid*, 434

40. Guillaume Pepin, *Conciones dominicalium ex epistolis et evangelis totius anni, pars pars hiemalis* (Antwerp, 1656), 258.

41. *Ibid*, 66

42. *Ibid*, 67



There are those who object that the office of preaching does not belong to women, for this was prohibited by the Apostle [Paul] who said, "It is not permitted for women to preach." This is conceded regularly, and in common law. However, in certain cases, through the action of the Holy Spirit, this has happened.<sup>43</sup>

He adds that Christ greatly honored Magdalene by appearing to her first, sending her to the Apostles to preach the Good News. "From this it can be seen that women should not be looked down upon."<sup>44</sup>

Using a similar argument, based on Jacobus da Voragine's *Golden Legend*, which stated that Magdalene, accompanied by Lazarus, Martha and Maximinus, had been put to sea on a rudderless ship by the enemies of the faith some fourteen years after the Crucifixion, Pepin says:

Then in Marseilles and afterwards in Aix, [Mary Magdalene] proclaimed the Word and attracted people to the faith by her preaching. And if it is said by some that a woman should not preach publicly, as with the Apostle's statement in I Timothy 2 . . . it must be answered that this is normally the case. But God is not bound by human laws, and can make women, just like men, assume the office of preaching.<sup>45</sup>

He likewise points out that various female saints have stood alongside men in the strength of their faith:

Not only are men made strong in order that they can wage war against the enemies of the Catholic faith and suffer whatever torture is used with equanimity; what is even more remarkable is that the female sex, which is by nature timid and fragile, is often made just as strong: so we see in the examples of those most blessed brides of Christ Katherine, Barbara, Agnes, Cecilia, Agatha, Christina, Ursula, and many others.<sup>46</sup>

It is true that Pepin describes female nature as timid and fragile, but this was simply the standard medieval biosocial viewpoint, and the terms were not especially pejorative.

Pepin uses these examples to show the women in his audience that they too can show their devotion to and imitation of Christ. Sources indicate that women far outnumbered men in sermon attendance, and Pepin brings in a Biblical example to illustrate his point: "The Queen of Sheba, who came from the ends of the earth to hear the Wisdom of Solomon, signifies that in many things women are more avid to hear the Word of God than men. For men trust in their reason, and often do not care to go to

---

43. Pepin, *CQ*, 309.

44. *Ibid*, 307

45. Pepin, *CS*, 292

46. Pepin, *SP*, 414.

sermons.<sup>47</sup> He attributes women's greater piety partially to their compassion and maternal solicitude.<sup>48</sup> This is what makes them good nurses:

It is revealed from this story that women are more compassionate to the sick and infirm than men, about whom we don't reach such things. On account of this, you find kindly nuns administering to the needs of the sick in the great hospitals, such as the Hôtel Dieu in Paris, and the hospital called the Magdalene in Rouen.<sup>49</sup>

From the tenacity of the women at the cross, Pepin argues that women are more devout than men. But why? He answers that men presume too much in their own rational faculties:

Women are drawn more easily to faith and the correction of morals than men. For we often see women who have sinned gravely stung by the words of a preacher. But it is only rarely and always later on that we see evil men change their lives. This is at least partially because men presume too much in their abilities and trust in their reason. That's not the way with women. So we commonly find that they are more devout than men.<sup>50</sup>

He points out that during church services, women are more likely to say their rosaries piously, while men sleep or talk among themselves.<sup>51</sup> Some women, he says, go too far in their religious observances, spending so much time in church praying that they neglect their household duties, thereby incurring their husbands' wrath.<sup>52</sup> But on the whole he approves of their greater piety: "Women are in many things more devout than men, whether it be praying, visiting holy places, or taking the sacraments. Many confess often and take communion on the principal feast days, which we seldom find men doing."<sup>53</sup>

Women occupy a very significant place in the sermons of Pepin. He did not hold women singlehandedly responsible for the fall of humankind, and discussed real situations that pertained to women in a manner that was often sympathetic. Most importantly, he offered positive but realistic role models to the women in his audience. His devotion to the Virgin Mary did not deter him from offering other, more complex and less perfect women as examples to be emulated. He tied his examples closely to his female hearers, as with the example of the Queen of Sheba. And he even gave a few arguments to the women in his audience to use against their husbands, if the latter suddenly decided to treat them as if they had been created from man's foot.

---

47. Pepin, *CQ*, 60.

48. Pepin, *RA*, 165.

49. Pepin, *CQ*, 351.

50. Pepin, *CS*, 517.

51. Pepin, *RA*, 351.

52. Guillaume Pepin, *Elucidationem in confiteor* (Antwerp, 1656), 358.

53. Pepin, *RA*, 352.

Pepin was not an early feminist. He shared many of the common prejudices of his age against women, believing them to be more vain, talkative, and envious than men. But by examining his work alongside that of his contemporaries and succeeding generations, we can obtain a richer understanding of gender attitudes.

A distinct hardening of attitudes toward women occurred in the generation after Pepin's death and this, too, can be illustrated through an examination of one representative preacher, Francois LePicart (1504-1556). In over three hundred sermons by LePicart, the most striking difference from pre-Reformation sermons is the absence of women, especially contemporary women. Part of this difference can, of course, be accounted for by the change in sermon structure required in response to attacks from humanists and Protestants. Late medieval sermons had contained legendary material, fables, humorous stories and other material intended to make difficult theological points intelligible to ordinary, often illiterate people. Post-Reformation Catholic sermons, on the other hand, stay much closer to the Biblical passages being explicated, and consequently there is little room for the "everyday life" discussions that had animated late medieval sermons.

Other than the Virgin Mary and the occasional female saint, the only women LePicart mentions are those of Jesus' time, and particularly the women at the cross. He too must explain why Jesus first chose to manifest his Resurrection to women. His analysis, typical of Catholic and Protestant sermons from the mid-sixteenth century, is significant for changes in tone and language. He tells his listeners:

Woman is the fragile sex, and yet nevertheless our Lord showed himself first to women after the Resurrection. Our Lord always made it is habit to choose those who are weak and feeble in order to display the truth of His majesty, and to testify to Him.<sup>54</sup>

At first glance, this is not terribly different from Pepin's formulation. Yet in virtually every line that mentions women, words such as fragile, weak and feeble appear. In another sermon, he adds "when our Lord wanted to do great things, He always picked simple folk and poor sinners. In such a way He wanted to make His Resurrection first known to women, who are the fragile sex, and of little virtue."<sup>55</sup> He cannot resist disparaging Mary Magdalene's joyful reception of her Lord: "When Mary Magdalene recognized our Saviour after the Resurrection, she wanted to embrace Him, but He said, "Do not touch me." She wanted to hold and embrace Him so that she would not lose Him again. She did this because of her silliness."<sup>56</sup> For those who might have wondered about the empty tomb, he explains, "It is inconceivable that the women would have known how to remove the stone from in front of the monument, considering that woman is silly and weak, and regularly of little enterprise."<sup>57</sup>

---

54. Francois LePicart, *Les sermons et instructions chrestiennes, pour tous les jours de caresme, & feries de Pasques* (Paris, 1566), fol. 155.

55. Ibid, fol. 159

56. Ibid, fol. 171.

LePicart must also tackle the issue of women preaching, something that had not only been possible for many earlier preachers, but had indeed occurred. His position is unequivocal:

[The Samaritan Woman went into the town and said] "He told me my whole life." By this, the Lutherans would have you believe that women can preach and that the Samaritan Woman did preach. But she did not *speak in the manner of preaching*, but simply through the admiration she felt for the Lord who had declared her whole life to her [emphasis added].<sup>57</sup>

He goes on:

Saint Paul prohibits women from preaching . . . It is forbidden to women to preach and teach in public: but privately the mother can teach her children and servants. The abbess can teach and correct her nuns. But in public and in full congregation, it is not woman's place to preach, and is quite repugnant. The reason is that to preach is to have authority, and the natural and proper condition of woman is one of subjection.<sup>58</sup>

LePicart explains that "woman cannot dominate man, because woman is like our flesh, which must be subject to and obey the spirit."<sup>60</sup> Significantly, LePicart never uses the word *prêcher* (the French equivalent of *predicare*) but only *annoncer* (to announce) or more often simply *dire* (to say) in order to describe what had earlier almost always been translated as "to preach." The natural order argument dominates most mid-sixteenth century pulpit oratory regarding women.

LePicart's contemporary, the Dominican Étienne Paris (1495-1561) is equally vehement in his opposition to women preaching, commenting that " . . . public doctrine only belongs to the perfect sex, which has more solid reason, more stable judgment, and greater learning. [Women's] charge is not to preach in public, because this would put them above men in subversion of the natural order, which does not allow women to dominate men."<sup>61</sup> The reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) was no different from Catholics in his rendering of the Biblical events; he employs terms such as foolish, weak and silly to describe the women at the cross.<sup>62</sup> Both Catholic and Protestant preachers, to the degree that they dealt with ordinary women at all, now spoke of how female vanity and sexuality

---

57. Ibid, fol. 186

58. Ibid, fol. 172.

59. Ibid, fol. 173.

60. François LePicart, *Les sermons et instructions chrestiennes, pour tous les jours de l'Avent, jusques à Noël: & de tous les Dimanches & Festes, depuis Noël jusques à Caresme* (Paris, 1566), fol. 290.

61. Étienne Paris, *Homélies suyvant les matières traictées ès principales festes & solennités de l'année* (Paris, 1553), fol. 65.

62. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Saving Work of Christ*, Leroy Nixon, trans. (Welwyn, England, 1950), 168-185.

ruined the lives of men.<sup>63</sup> The differences between mid-sixteenth century sermons, which are far more stereotypical in their portrayals of women than pre-Reformation sermons, can be summarized as an absence of women from sermons and increasingly negative depictions of all women based on contemporary natural order arguments.

Just as one finds a full range of attitudes about women even today, so too did representations of women in the late Middle Ages vary tremendously, even among a group of men who are usually portrayed as antifeminist. By looking at individual sermons, especially those given to ordinary people, we can see the full range of opinions in a particular time and place. Some of these were misogynistic. But Guillaume Pepin, and many others, do not fit into that category. Pepin portrays women not as part of an archetype, but as individuals capable of both good and evil. His women are **not** one dimensional — they talk too much, get drunk, procure abortions, and put their beauty on parade for all to see. But they also exhibit genuinely pious behavior that often reflects poorly on men. He makes explicit the idea that women have often surpassed men in the most crucial tests of the Christian faith. Part of the reason for these attitudes can be traced to the feminization of sainthood in the later Middle Ages described by David Herlihy,<sup>64</sup> and a paradoxical appreciation of weakness that blurred gender lines,<sup>65</sup> but also to two other factors: the preponderance of women at sermons, and the so-called degenerate sermon type of the late Middle Ages that allowed for use of legends, drama, and classical and medieval authors.

By examining individuals, we can measure differences across regions and relatively short time spans, and such a study reveals that increasingly in the sixteenth century, attitudes do conform more strictly to the stereotype. The close study of the language used by preachers reveals more than a simple examination of their statements and choice of examples. Further study of individuals and investigation of the reasons for changes in attitudes and behaviors must be the next step in evaluating gender ideologies among churchmen in this period of critical change.

---

63. Mid-sixteenth century Italian pulpits rang with denunciations by preachers against "... whores ... [who] are responsible for the loss of so many souls!" Richard Trexler, "La prostitution florentine au XVe siècle: Patronages et clientèles," *Annales: E.S.C.* 36 (1981): 1004. Similarly, Martin Luther warned his students in Wittenberg against syphilitic whores for the harm they "do to young men who are so wretchedly ruined and whose blood is contaminated before they have achieved full manhood." Theodore G. Tappert (ed.) *Luther: Letters of Spiritual Comfort* (Philadelphia 1955), 293.

64. David Herlihy, *Medieval Households* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 113.

65. See Caroline Walker Bynum, "... And Women His Humanity? Female Imagery in the Religious Writings of the Later Middle Ages," in Caroline Walker Bynum, Steven Harnell, and Paula Richman (eds.) *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols* (Boston, 1986), 279.